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Audiences as Learners, Producers as Teachers: DVD Commentaries as Pedagogy

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Keywords: Culture-as-pedagogy; Identity; Ethics; *Grey's Anatomy*

Abstract: This discussion focuses on the pedagogical function of commentaries on DVD releases of popular cultural products, using the television show *Grey's Anatomy* as an example. We explore how these commentaries formalize learning for audience members and constrain new understandings of cultural portrayals.

The role of popular culture as a source of informal adult learning has been explored – although perhaps not entirely excavated – in recent years. One conclusion common among adult education working in this area is that cultural consumption exemplifies the tensions of agency and constraint in social life, because audience members both receive and construct meanings and identities as they consume cultural products (Armstrong, 2008; Wright & Sandlin, 2009). Indeed, this is one reason that pop culture is seen as an interesting, unique pedagogical form. This roundtable will continue to explore pop culture as a source of informal adult learning, and introduce questions around the pedagogical function of producers', directors', writers' and/or actors' commentaries which are now standard inclusions on DVD releases.

Lifestyle television shows and magazines aimed at self-improvement have an overtly instructional tenor. Miller, Armstrong and Edwards (2005) examine reality lifestyle television's rhetorical strategies and its arguments for personal transformation, relating them to classic narratives of quest and change. Sandlin (2005) investigates how a mainstream consumer education lifestyle magazine conveys and advocates constructions of the "good consumer." Edwards and Usher (1997) suggest that, during postmodern globalization, formal education becomes a consumable product, and that cultural products and consumer venues become sources and sites of education and learning. As Giroux (2004) explains, "Culture is recognized as a social field where goods and social practices are not only produced, distributed, and consumed but also invested with various meanings and ideologies implicated in the generation of political effects" (p. 59). Through their analyses, adult education scholars illustrate how pop culture helps audience members learn about and construct social identities, understandings of education and work, and connections between political, social and cultural realms (see also Fisher, Harris, & Jarvis, 2008; Tisdell, 2008; Wright, 2007).

Added to this cultural landscape is the commentary track now routinely appended to DVD releases. Introduced in the mid-1980s to several classic film releases, commentaries were eventually adopted by the television industry. Bertellini and Reich (2010) identify two forms of commentary: one provided by the program's actors, directors and producers, and a second by scholars and critics. Both forms add an element of education through a "close reading" of these programs – a move that has, "indirectly or directly, expanded [their] authorial halo" (p. 103).

In this roundtable we will explore whether commentaries – well intentioned or otherwise – distract viewers from independent readings of the televisual text. Moreover, we are interested in the extent to which commentaries disrupt critical, enriched readings. We will begin with the initial episode of the show *Grey's Anatomy*, which is consistently rated among the top 20 shows in North America. In her commentary about the episode, Shonda Rhimes, the show's creator,

juxtaposes one scene in which nurses are insulted by two surgical interns with the subsequent scene in which nurses clearly know more about treatment options than the attending intern does. She notes that her intention was not to disparage nurses but to establish the importance of their knowledge, skill and expertise. We ask whether Rhimes's insistence that nurses have valued knowledge mitigates the diminishment of this group of professionals in real and fictional life. Among the questions raised in this roundtable, we ask whether the commentary glosses over issues of social and professional inequality by insisting that such scenes are designed for narrative torque. Does it innocently provide another voice to the viewer's inner dialogue? Or does it mark a shift in pop culture from a source of informal adult learning to more intentional teaching about both how to receive cultural, social and political messages, and how to actually engage in cultural consumption?

This roundtable relates to research being conducted with funding from the University of Calgary Starter Grant and SSHRC Standard Research Grant programs. It involves a case study with undergraduate medical and nursing students who watch *Grey's Anatomy* and/or *Scrubs*. It explores messages in the shows about identity, ethics and pedagogy, and how those messages mesh with what participants are learning through their programs and practical experiences.

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